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SUBJECT: UNHCR MONITORING VISIT TO CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Ref: A) Hanoi 992; B) Phnom Penh 1608

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Summary

1. (SBU) UNHCR recently completed its 13th monitoring mission to the Central Highlands and reported nothing out of the ordinary in terms of the well-being of the interviewed returnees. Significantly, the UNHCR team was able to meet with a returnee who had been tried and convicted of human smuggling. The team also learned about - and received a pledge from local authorities to be able to meet with - another ethnic minority who had been recently arrested. Local officials welcomed the USG-funded construction of a school and are seeking additional such micro-projects. The UNHCR team visited this school and reported that it is up and running, with the district in which it is located funding the construction of additional classrooms. UNHCR has received agreement from the Cambodian authorities to conduct a joint mission to Cambodia's Mondulkiri Province to look for Vietnamese ethnic minorities who reportedly remain in the jungle there. End Summary.

UNHCR Has Met with 70 Percent of Returnees

2. (SBU) On September 18, UNHCR representatives Giuseppe di Vincentis and Vu Anh Son reported to diplomatic representatives on their recent five-day trip to the Central Highlands. This was the first UNHCR visit since Assistant High Commissioner Erika Feller's April trip (Ref A) to Vietnam (and UNHCR's 13th overall monitoring visit to the Central Highlands). The UNHCR team visited Chu Se, Ia Grai and Duc Co districts in Gia Lai Province and Sa Thay District in Kon Tum Province, and met with a number of returnees in both provinces. The meetings took place in private, i.e., without local officials present, and "nothing controversial" emerged from the discussions. The returnees in general appeared to be with their families and reintegrating well into their communities. To date, UNHCR has met at least once with 70 percent of the total of 196 volunteer returnees and deportees.

Access to Detained Returnee a "Positive Step"

3. (SBU) In Gia Lai, the UNHCR team met with Ksor Cuen (MTN-352), who was arrested in September 2005 and recently sentenced to 4.5 years in prison for people smuggling. He is currently in a detention center in Pleiku, where he awaits transfer to a prison elsewhere in the province. He appeared in good shape and admitted to the UNHCR representatives that he received USD 50/person to smuggle ethnic minorities to Cambodia. He had no complaints to report and had been able to meet with family members, di Vincentis said.

¶4. (SBU) During a separate meeting with Chu Se district officials, the UNHCR representatives learned of another arrested returnee: Kpuih Thu (MTN-276), who was detained on June 11 and is being charged with people smuggling and "trying to mobilize Dega separatists" in the district. The local authorities pledged to allow UNHCR access to this individual (assuming he is indeed found guilty and sentenced). Di Vincentis described the access to Cuen and the promise to have access to Thu as "very positive steps" and "significant gestures" on the part of the Vietnamese authorities

Local Official Welcomes USG-funded Micro-Project

¶5. (SBU) The Chu Se District People's Committee Chairman described for the UNHCR team the economic difficulties facing local ethnic minorities and said that these are the primary factors leading individuals to cross into Cambodia for what they think will be a better life. Education is another key concern, with most ethnic minorities only receiving education up to grade five. The chairman expressed his hope that, by 2008, the level of compulsory education will be raised to grade eight. The district chairman described the USG-funded school in his district as "very welcome" and expressed his hope for additional projects. Gia Lai Province's People's Committee Chairman also endorsed the micro-projects and said he would welcome "more foreign assistance." (Note: The EU is reportedly looking at funding one or two schools in Gia Lai. End Note.)

¶6. (SBU) In spite of local officials' warm embrace of the school and additional micro-projects, di Vincentis noted that the process leading to official approval was not an easy one. "It was difficult to convince the authorities to allow the project to go forward," he said. The UNHCR officials were allowed to visit the school and reported that it is functioning, with 200 students attending two daily sessions. The district is funding the construction of a playground and additional classroom space, which will be completed in

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two months, di Vincentis explained.

Cambodia

¶7. (SBU) Turning to recent arrivals in Cambodia, di Vincentis noted that 16 ethnic minorities from Vietnam arrived in Cambodia two weeks ago and are now under UNHCR's care in Phnom Penh. Some 15 other individuals also recently arrived directly in Phnom Penh, and UNHCR requested, and the Cambodian Government agreed to, a joint mission to Mondulkiri Province to look for an additional suspected 15-20 individuals who may still be there (Ref B). UNHCR suspects that these individuals, and the recent direct arrivals, may be from Dak Lak Province. If this is the case, UNHCR will seek to send a team to Dak Lak to investigate what may be driving this new outflow of ethnic minorities, di Vincentis said.

MARINE